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Philosophy East and West, Vol. 39, No. 4. (Oct., 1989), pp. 449-451.

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Comment and Discussion

Paul J. Griffiths **Why Buddhas can't remember their previous lives**

Most papers published by Western scholars of Indian philosophy have, until now, been largely exegetical in nature. This is for very good reasons. An enormous amount of material has needed (and still needs) to be made available to the scholarly community by way of translation and commentary. But perhaps there is also room, and need, for the occasional feuilleton like this, an avowedly polemical piece attempting to follow the philosophical implications of a particular argument or set of definitions to a conclusion that its authors might not have wished to accept. There is, after all, a long and honorable tradition of the application of this method in Indian (especially Buddhist) polemical literature: what else is the *prasaṅga*? The positive results of such an approach to Indian philosophy might be that the positions argued for in the texts are taken with greater philosophical seriousness than the exegetical approach allows, and that some of their entailments might be more clearly seen than is at present the case. Such, in a particular small instance, are the goals of the present piece. The argument given here is presented not with the assurance that it is either valid or sound (though naturally I think it to be both), but rather with the hope that it might lead to further discussion.

The standard Buddhist account of memory employs two technical terms—*smṛti* and *pratyabhijñāna*. In this context, for reasons that will become apparent, I shall translate the former as 're-presentation' (in the sense of presenting again what has been presented before), and the latter as 'recognition'. The former will denote the reappearance in a given mental continuum (*citta-saṃtāna*) of the complete experiential content of a preceding moment or moments of experience. Examples: I hear again music I heard twenty years ago; I see again the buttons on a coat my mother used to wear when I was a child; I touch again my first lover's lips. In all cases the re-presentation (*smṛti*) is of the complete experiential content of the original experience. Recognition (*pratyabhijñāna*) denotes a conscious acknowledgment on the part of the subject that an experience she has just had was in fact an instance of re-presentation. So, for example, I acknowledge to myself that the music I just heard with my mind's ear was a re-presentation of the version of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony that I heard in the Royal Albert Hall when I was fifteen. And so forth.

Buddhist texts typically say that there are three severally necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that a given mental event must fulfill if it is to be classified as an instance of re-presentation, a *smaraṇacitta*. First, it must have as its object something previously experienced (*pūrvānubhūtārtha*) and must

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Philosophy East & West, volume 39, no. 4 (October 1989). © by University of Hawaii Press. All rights reserved.

re-present that object in the sense given. Second, it must be connected causally with that previously experienced object. And third, the mental event in which the original object was experienced and that in which it is re-presented must be part of the same mental continuum (*ekasamtānika*).¹

Recognition then follows from re-presentation by way of a conceptualized (and perhaps even vocalized) judgment that (*iti*) the experience in question was an instance of *smṛti*.² Here we approach close to the heart of the argument: what kind of judgment is at issue here? Typically, it is said to be a judgment of the form *I saw this*. Buddhist metaphysics requires that when and if Buddhas make judgments of this kind, they do so only to speak with the vulgar. They do not really mean it, or at least they do not mean it in the sense in which a *prthagjana* would mean it, for they know that the personal pronoun has no referent, or, more precisely, that it refers only to the aggregates (*skandha*). So Buddhas cannot have recognition in the exact sense in which that term is usually interpreted in the texts. They may, of course, be able to make other sorts of judgments—for example, *the mental event that just occurred was a re-presentation in the sense that it occurred in the same continuum as did that event of which it was a re-presentation*—and so be able to preserve their ability to have (a somewhat modified kind of) recognition.

But there are deeper problems. A re-presentation is supposed to re-present the full content of a previous moment of experience and a recognition to judge that this has indeed occurred. If we add the straightforward (and pan-Buddhist) premise that every instance of experience belonging to all non-Buddhas is tainted with passions of various sorts, especially egocentricity (*asmimāna*) and its concomitants (*rāga*, *dveṣa*, *moha*), then the following argument is easy to construct:

- (1) An instance of re-presentation (*smaraṇacitta*) represents to its subject the full experienced content of a past moment of experience.
- (2) An instance of recognition (*pratyabhijñānacitta*) is a judgment that an immediately preceding mental event was a re-presentation.
- (3) All moments of experience belonging to non-Buddhas have some passions as constituents.
- (4) All moments of experience belonging to all Buddhas are entirely free from passions.
- (5) All Buddhas make only true judgments.
- (6) No Buddha can experience an instance of re-presentation that re-presents a moment of experience belonging to a non-Buddha [from (1), (3), and (4)].
- (7) No Buddha can recognize that he has had re-presented to him a moment of experience belonging to a non-Buddha [from (2), (5), and (6)].

To restate: Buddhas can neither experience a re-presentation of any moment of experience in any past life (when they were not Buddhas), nor can they judge that they have so experienced. So: *buddhānāṃ pūrvanivāsānusrūtiḥ pūrvanivāsapratyabhijñānaṃ ca na yujyete*. Buddhas cannot remember their previous lives. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, or, if you prefer, *siddham etat*.

This argument can be challenged, I think, from two perspectives. First, exegetically, it could be claimed that I have misrepresented what Buddhists have typically meant in such contexts as these by *smṛti* and *pratyabhijñāna*, and that premises (1) and (2) are therefore false. Second, philosophically, it could be claimed that the argument as it stands is invalid. Either challenge, fully explored and discussed, could prove fruitful and productive of new knowledge.

Finally, a brief comment on what Buddhas can have if they cannot have memory of their previous lives. They can have propositional knowledge of the truth of large (perhaps infinitely large) sets of propositions of the form *experiential event E₁ is causally related to experiential event E in such a way that it is proper to say that E₁ is a re-presentation of E*. But knowledge of propositions is, phenomenologically, very far from *smṛti* (and memory).

NOTES

1. This is the burden of the account given by Vasubandhu in the ninth chapter of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*: *yadi tarhi sarvathāpi nāsty ātmā katham kṣaṇikeṣu cittaṣu cirānubhūta-syārthasya smaraṇam bhavati pratyabhijñānam vā/ smṛtviṣayasamjñānavayāc cittaviśeṣāt/ kīdrśāc cittaviśeṣāt yato 'nantaram smṛtir bhavati/ tadābhogasadṛśasambandhisamjñādim ato 'nupahata-prabhāvād āśrayaviśeṣaśokavyākṣepādibhiḥ/ tādrśo 'pi hy atadanvayaś cittaviśeṣo na samarthas tām smṛtim bhāvayitum tadanvayo 'pi cānyādrśo na samarthas tām smṛtim bhāvayitum/ ubhayathā tu samartha ity evaṃ smṛtir bhavati anyasya sāmartyādarśanāt* (*Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya of Ācārya Vasubandhu with Sphūtarthā Commentary of Ācārya Yaśomitra*, ed. Dwārikādās Śāstrī (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1981), pp. 1215– 1216).

2. Yaśomitra, in his commentary (*Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*) on the rather unhelpful *smaraṇād eva ca pratyabhijñānam* from the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, says: *tad evedam yan mayā drṣtam iti smaraṇāt* (ed. cit., p. 1217).